

District

EXTRA

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BY HYOSUB SHIN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The "One Stop Mobile Career Center," a 38-foot-long bus with computerized job search facilities that travels to neighborhoods with high unemployment, stops at 14th Street and Columbia Road NW.

JOBS ON WHEELS

A Bus Is Bringing the City Employment Office to D.C.'s Neediest Neighborhoods

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Bus Brings Job Search Close to Home

City Initiative Helps Expand Opportunities

By YOLANDA WOODLEE
Washington Post Staff Writer

When Rita Harris was a teenager looking for a summer job in the District in 1983, she had to march downtown to the city's Department of Employment Services, stand in a long line and wait. Not her 14-year-old son, Quintin.

He rolled out of bed one recent Saturday and had to go only two blocks to the "One Stop Mobile Career Center," a beige and yellow bus that delivered the city's summer jobs program straight to his Columbia Heights neighborhood. Rita Harris didn't have to take time off from work to ferry her son downtown or pay parking fees. And Quintin didn't have to wait in line.

The 38-foot-long bus, a state-of-the-art traveling jobs center, is the latest city strategy to move more than 20,500 residents off the unemployment rolls and into the labor market.

Although the District's unemployment rate of 6.8 percent, as reported in March, is only 1.1 percentage points above the national average, there are neighborhood "hot spots" where the rate is substantially higher.

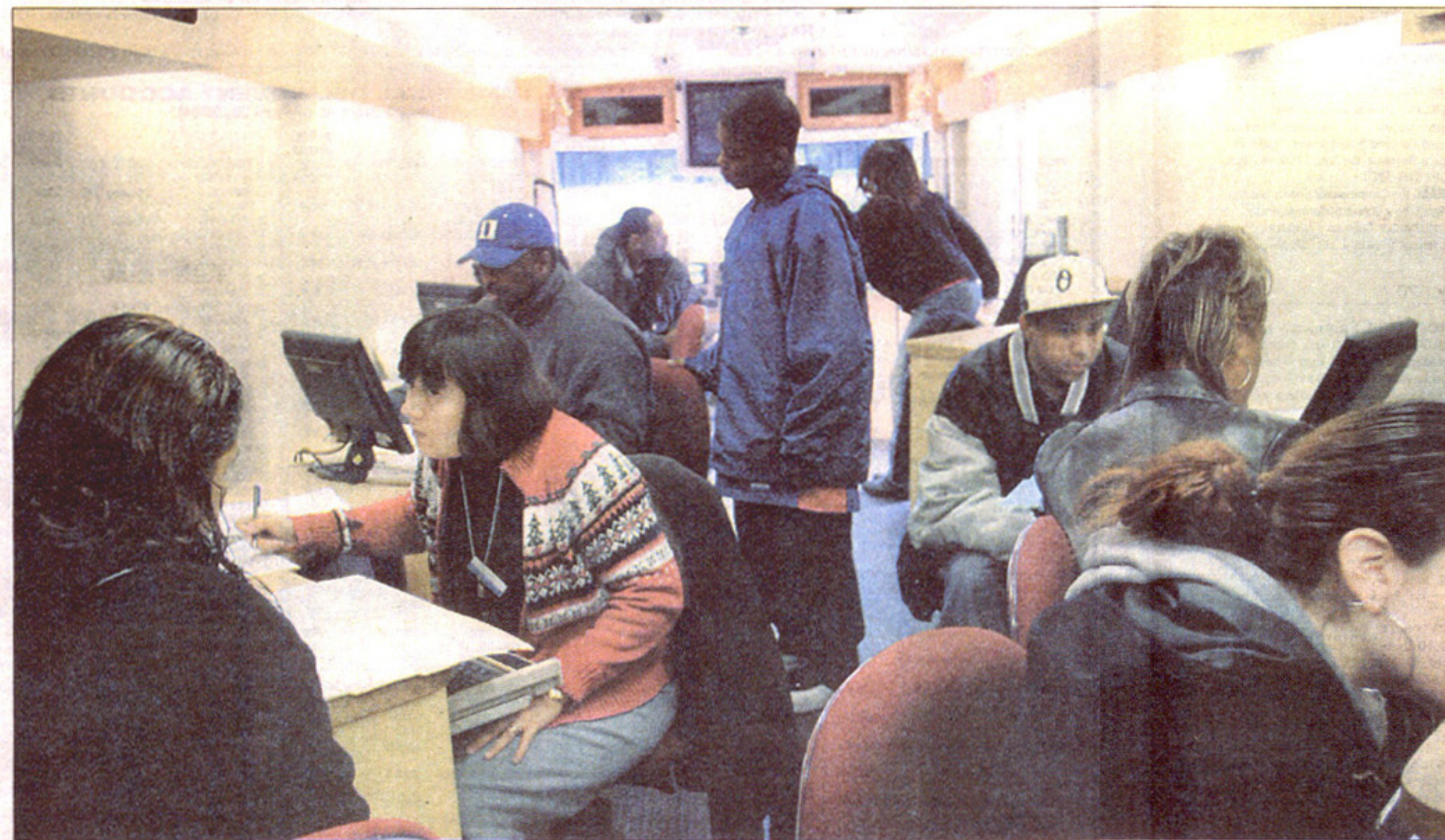
The bus is the city's latest "faith-based initiative," a program designed to involve the District's religious community in helping to find jobs for the unemployed.

The mobile jobs center takes job counseling and information to its intended beneficiaries. It is a rolling advertisement that help is available.

To get the bus, the city competed for one of the U.S. Department of Labor's 12 Faith-based and Community Initiative grants. The employment services department received \$474,000 to buy the bus and establish an office to work with churches and community groups in reaching the disadvantaged.

The Rev. Lionel Edmonds, pastor of Mount Lebanon Baptist Church, hosted the bus last month as part of a church-sponsored weekend job fair. Having it parked at churches removes several barriers that sometimes discourage the jobless from seeking help in finding employment, including lack of transportation and the need for baby-sitters; many churches have child care available.

"It gets the District agency into contact ... with the constituency it is supposed to serve," Edmonds



A view of the bus's job search center. Leticia Serrano, a program analyst from the Department of Employment Services, second from left, interviews a job seeker who is registering with the mobile center.

said. "That's what the District government needs to be doing more of: Come on out of the walls and serve out in the streets of the community. That's what the drug dealers are doing. That's why they're successful."

While the emphasis so far has been on getting summer jobs for young people in targeted areas, the plans for the bus are to direct unemployed and unskilled workers to training, education and jobs.

Since Mayor Anthony A. Williams unveiled the bus in September, it has crisscrossed the District, going from churches and community centers to halfway houses, homeless shelters and schools. Anywhere there might be people who need jobs, the bus will go.

The bus is dispatched to the city's "hot spots," 14 problem areas identified by the Williams administration as being most in need of employment assistance because of high poverty and crime rates.

The District's highest area of un-

employment, according to the 2000 Census figures, is in Ward 8, in Southeast, which had a jobless rate of 22 percent. In one community cluster that includes Barry Farm, the rate was 26 percent.

On a recent Saturday, the bus was parked at 14th Street and Columbia Road NW near the Latin American Youth Center. Quintin and a friend, Devyn Black, 14, were among about 50 youths who boarded the bus to sign up for the city's Passport-to-Work Summer Youth Employment program, which aims to put 5,000 young people in jobs.

Inside the bus, Quintin, an eighth-grader at Shaw Junior High School, sat at a computer work station with a jobs counselor, filled out a registration form and effortlessly began his summer job search.

"It's a good idea," Quintin said. "All I had to do is walk around the corner. Some people don't feel like going all the way downtown."

His mother added: "This is more

convenient. ... This is helpful to the people who can't get [downtown]."

The one-stop mobile center offers many of the same services as the downtown employment services office and eight one-stop centers peppered across town: career counseling, community referrals to aid job applicants and computer assistance.

"Maybe it's the wave of the future," said Gregory P. Irish, director of the employment services department. "Instead of spending more money on more centers, you have a center that you can move from place to place. ... It's an office on wheels."

The mayor said the uses for the bus are limitless. It can be parked at events with large crowds where people can pop in and get job information and Internet access.

"It's good for the community," Williams said, standing near the bus as it was parked at city offices on North Capitol Street NE during an Earth Day celebration last month.

"Not everybody has transportation to get to city offices."

When Williams led a tour of the bus last year, he called it "an innovative and visionary idea" to improve the city's efforts to reach all segments of the city. He acknowledged that there are residents who won't come to the city's employment services department because they have a "general mistrust of a government-run office."

Since Williams took office in January 1999, the District has seen a net gain of 56,700 jobs, including jobs brought by employers who have relocated their workforces here, according to the Labor Department.

"The city has done a good job in creating jobs," Williams said. "We've created more jobs than many cities. Now our challenge is getting people for the jobs."

Jared Bernstein, a labor expert with a Washington-based think tank, said a mobile program to

reach out to unskilled workers can be an asset as long as the focus of the program is on training for local jobs that are available.

"This bus sounds like the upside to this approach because it's pretty localized and matches job seekers to employers with job openings," said Bernstein, who is a senior economist with the Economic Policy Institute. "That's far better than sending people out into the workforce for whatever they can find."

Bernstein also said using the faith-based community has additional advantages because job seekers frequently need to be connected to programs that offer services such as child care and career readiness.

"They need to learn about promptness and appropriate demeanor," Bernstein said. "These all come under the purview of helping to create a bridge from poverty to work. In that instance, this provides a bridge. To the extent that the bus provides those services, it can only



Quintin Harris, left, and friend Devyn Black, both 14, talk near the bus at 14th Street and Columbia Road NW. "It's a good idea," says Quintin. "All I had to do is walk around the corner. Some people don't feel like going all the way downtown."

help."

Over the past eight months, the bus, which costs \$150 to fill with gas, has been a part of more than 25 events, including job fairs at Galilee Baptist Church, Covenant House and the Southwest Community House.

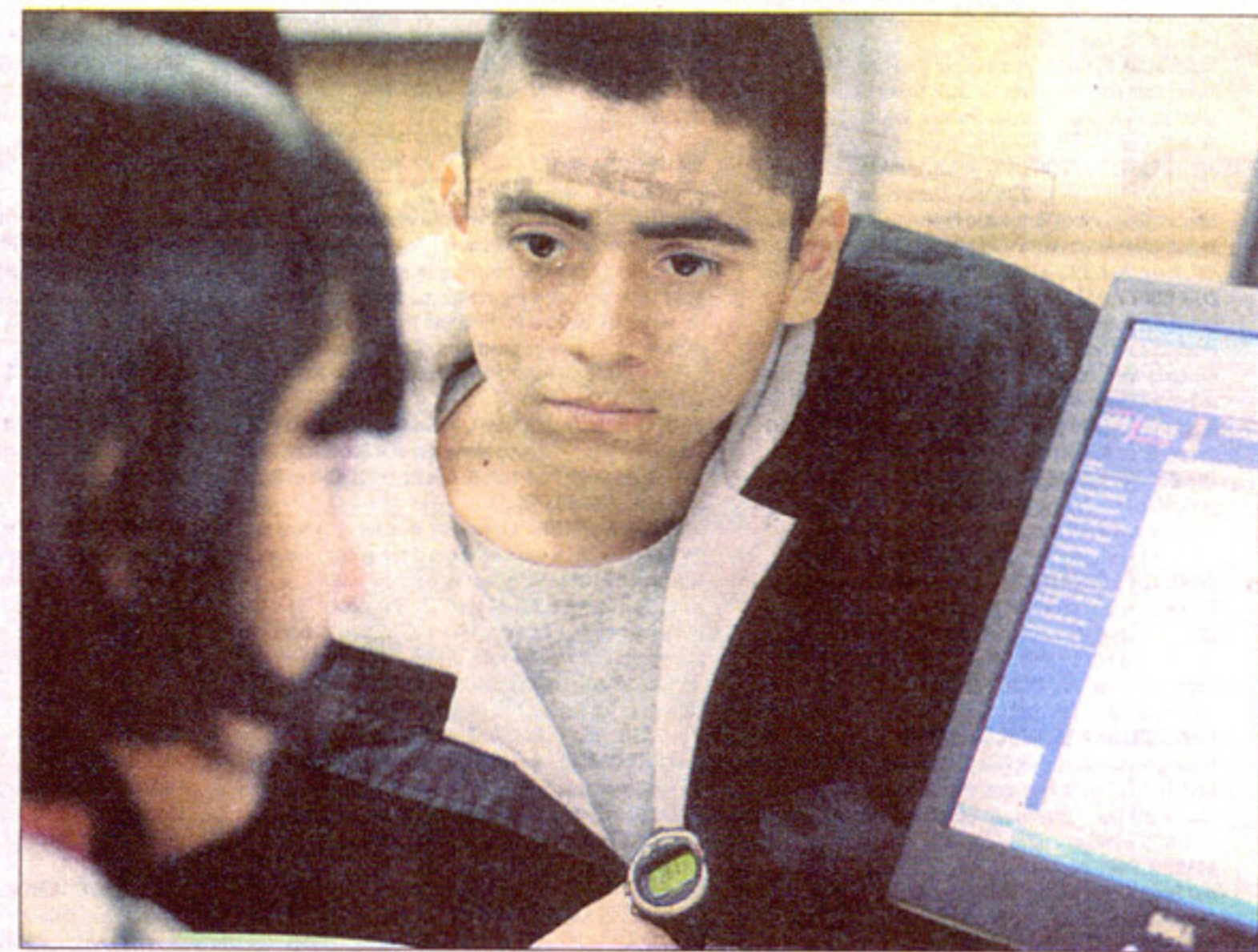
The bus travels not only for job fairs, but also for health screenings and citizen summits. It can sometimes be used as a classroom. Eventually, labor officials hope to take the bus to hotels where many workers speak English as a second language. They intend to use literacy counselors to help workers improve their reading and language skills, Irish said. If hotel workers could increase their English skills, employers could promote from within their workforce, he said.

In addition to being dispatched to job sites to help underemployed workers upgrade skills, the bus will go on a "rapid response" basis to places where employers have issued pink slips.

The bus is equipped with 10 computerized work stations with swivel chairs and an online job bank. A plasma screen is used to teach participants how to use the city's existing, stationary one-stop job centers and for training in résumé preparation.

Once aboard, job searchers are greeted by a case manager who helps them get registered in the city's jobs database, determines their skills, and assesses whether they need additional training.

Constance McCrimmon, a case manager who has worked the job fairs on the bus, said the most common question she's greeted with is: "What kinds of jobs are you giving out?"



Jose Delcid, center, 16, gives an answer to city worker Leticia Serrano as he registers for job assistance services.

"I don't have a big book here with a list of jobs that I can give them," said McCrimmon, though job seekers can use the bus's computers to perform a job search. Instead, she said, her role is much more complex. At the Community for Creative Non-Violence shelter, McCrimmon said, about 75 people came aboard. Because they were homeless and many hadn't worked in a while, several needed training and were referred to full-service one-

stop centers.

"As a case worker, you are able to access that from [a person] in a brief encounter," she said. "We can start the process here, but the actual follow-up comes from the one-stop centers."

Over recent months, the employment office has focused on young people applying for the summer jobs program. A "Stop the Violence" youth employment campaign was kicked off in December at Ballou

High, where students will be given priority, Irish said.

In Columbia Heights, where the unemployment rate in 2000 was 9.7 percent, Devyn Black came to the bus hoping to find a summer job.

"I wanted to find out about the summer youth program," said Devyn, a ninth-grader at Hyde Leadership Public Charter School. "I want to get a job and do something positive, so I won't be out on the streets doing nothing."